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# SOME COMMON ERRORS RESPECTING THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY

GARRICK MALLERY.

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EXTRACTED FROM THE BULLETIN OF THE  
PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DECEMBER 8, 1877.

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PHILADELPHIA :  
COLLINS, PRINTER, 705 JAYNE STREET.  
1878.

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Mr. GARRICK MALLERY commenced a paper on  
SOME COMMON ERRORS RESPECTING THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

Mr. ALVORD remarked on the disagreement between archaeologists and others respecting the origin of the American Indians.

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132D MEETING.

DECEMBER 8, 1877.

Vice-President HILGARD in the Chair.

Fifty-six members and visitors present.

Mr. MALLERY continued his paper on  
SOME COMMON ERRORS RESPECTING THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

(ABSTRACT.)

The traveller Catlin announced in his well-known Letters, dated 1839—"the Indians of North America are copper colored . . . were sixteen millions, and sent that number of daily prayers to the Great Spirit, and thanks for his goodness and protection."

The Sioux commission of 1876 urged, as an argument for political favor, that "the Indian is one of the few savage men who clearly recognize the existence of a Great Spirit."

De Tocqueville remarked of the American tribes—"there is no instance on record of so rapid a destruction."

The joint special committee of the two houses of Congress, in 1867, reported—"the Indians everywhere, with the exception of the tribes within the Indian Territory, are rapidly decreasing in numbers."

McKenney and Hall in their magnificent work, published in 1844, declare "all the tribes with which we are acquainted are in a state of rapid and progressive diminution."

One of the latest ethnological writers, Mr. Hubert H. Bancroft, states in his "Native Races," with philosophic emphasis, "the intercourse of civilized with savage people results in the disappearance of civilization or the extinction of the barbaric race," and bewails "all the millions of native Americans who have perished under the withering influence of European civilization."

These quotations exhibit some of the most important current errors regarding our aborigines. As read, the statements probably would receive general assent, but they are all seriously incorrect.

Mr. Catlin's designation of the color of copper for the Ameri-

can race was by no means original, having been used by many scientists (who never saw an Indian), in their classifications, sometimes under the less distinctive term red; but the Indians are neither red nor copper colored, having been first styled so from the universal use, for personal adornment, by those their discoverers first met, of the ochre found in their soil, whereby the skin remained stained long after the artificial hue had ceased to be fresh, and, as the brighter imported pigment became accessible to and greatly preferred by them, the hue of the ruddy metal for their description might well be amended into that of vermilion. It is true that, imitating the designation of their discoverers, the eastern Indians have called themselves "red men," but bands near the Rocky Mountains, who during the present century first met explorers of European descent, spontaneously styled the latter red, to mark the contrast of the sun-blistered faces of their visitors with their own darker skin. Their real prevailing color is brown, though with many various shades, some of which are not distinguishable from those found in other parts of the world, especially Asia, and there is no more propriety in styling them red than it would have been for Cæsar to have called the ancient Britons blue, when he noticed that they universally stained their bodies with woad. Without entering upon a too vast field of discussion, it may be indicated that the attempt to segregate our Indians from the rest of the world, by a color classification, has been even less successful in distinct results than that of craniologists.

To deny that the Indians believed in and worshipped an overruling power (which we have commonly called the Great Spirit or Manito), seems to be an iconoclastic assault upon a favorite field of religious illustration, perhaps tending to impair some, however superfluous, theological arguments. A better acquaintance, however, with our continent's traditions, and particularly with the etymology of its languages, shows that myths have been misunderstood, and the epithets of divinity mistranslated, when they have conveyed either the idea of monotheism, or of any personal and definite God with the attributes given by us to that word or the Latin *Deus*. The more learned missionaries are now not only agreed that a general creator or upholder never existed in aboriginal cosmogony, but that the much simpler belief in a single superhuman great chief or ruler is a modern graft.

The Jesuits in their relations confess that no one immaterial god was recognized by the Algonkins, the title Manito having been introduced by themselves in a personal sense, and that of the head Iroquois deity "Neo," or "Hawaneu," is asserted on linguistic grounds to be a mere corruption of the French "*Dieu*" and "*le bon Dieu*." One of the last claimants for a native god of causation was a missionary to the Cherokees, who boasted that he found the word of that language for "maker" used as a divine title, but, on being cross-examined by Prof. J. W. POWELL, he was forced to admit that the word did not mean "maker" in

the abstract (which the genius of no Indian tongue could express), and, from its incorporated pronominal particle, could not, as used by the Cherokee, signify "*my* maker," but *his*, *i. e.* the white man's maker, thus showing only the readiness with which the latter was admitted into America's elastic Pantheon. Doubtless in councils and other intercourse with Christians, Indian speakers employed the words *Manito*, *Taku Wakan*, and the like, in a sense acceptable to the known prejudices of their interlocutors, but that was through courtesy and policy, much as the strictest Protestant would once have found it convenient if not necessary, when at Rome, to speak respectfully of the Pope. The adoption of expressions as well as of ideas which were understood to be agreeable to or expected by the whites, is well illustrated in the use by western Indians of the terms "squaw" and "papoose," which are not in their languages, but are mere corruptions from the Algonkin. As all travellers insisted upon those words to signify woman and child, the tribes, as successively met, complied, with the result of a general belief that they were common to the several native dialects, which is no more true than if the English terms had been impressed upon them instead of those equally foreign.

The sixty-three linguistic families on this continent north of Mexico, some differing from each other in speech more widely than the Latin from the Teutonic nations, and even rivalling in degree the distinction between Indo-European and Semitic dialects, naturally present myths greatly diverse, but agree with marked unanimity in acknowledging no Supreme God, and in dividing all supra-human power among many personages to be propitiated, appeased, and utilized. It is true that they did not reach the advanced culture in which the Greek, Scandinavian, and other inheritors of earlier orient folk-lore produced the distinct figures of Zeus, Thor, Phœbus, Astarte, and Boreas. Scholars have, however, lately traced these classic personifications of sky, thunder, sun, moon, and wind, to their rude Aryan or Hamitic originals, which differ but slightly, save in the tincture of racial idiosyncrasy and habitat, from those of our Indians, while we sometimes strike curious native parallels to the serpent of Midgard and tortoise of Vishnu, the bridge of Al Sirat and the Elysian Fields, the labors of Herakles and doom of Sisyphus, Titanic wars and Cyclopean struggles.

In the infancy of all races appears what has, with doubtful propriety as applied to that stage of development, been styled nature worship, being at first merely an attempt to account for surrounding phenomena. There could have been no clear conception of the supernatural, because there was yet none of natural order—no miracle when there was no law to be suspended or changed. The human mind in its early development tried to explain the unknown by classification with what was already known, much as a scientific law is now formulated only after

proper relegation of ascertained facts to a category of similars, though among the latter there must be eventual discrimination between mere homology and true analogy. The savage only understood human feelings and capacities, and so peopled his philosophy with imagined actors to perform every operation of nature beyond his own powers. Thus many forms of being, motion, and action, became the work of personages with man's volition, and differing chiefly from him by greater intelligence, strength, and size. The polytheism naturally resulting was not so disgraceful to humanity as has been claimed, for the methods of modern science have only improved upon the barbaric or Archaic efforts through greater experience and more careful restrictive tests to guard against false conclusions from association of ideas, and tempting first impressions of cause and consequence. The sequence in mental progress is, 1st, Mythology; 2d, Metaphysics; 3d, Positive Philosophy.

It would then have been indeed strange, if the cosmogony and religion of our native tribes had contrasted greatly with those of our own ancestors of the stone age to which, of the old world's periods, they relatively belong. In fact there is no such contrast. The Indian filled nature with spirits only in the sense of explanation before mentioned, some one of his Anthropomorphic or Zoöomorphic conceptions to answer the pressing conundrums of *how* and *why*, ever personally accomplishing or acting in all phenomena whether spasmodic, continuous, or intermittent, with no relation to any general order, rule, or Providence. We now account for a thunder-storm by known rules of evaporation and condensation. The Indian was driven to invent a monstrous disturbing and overshadowing eagle, and he both explained and symbolized the howling wind by the howling wolf. The Dakota sees a Wakan not only in every unusual occurrence, but in each remarkable rock and noisy cataract, and recognizes its divinity by a tribute of tobacco. Among the Iroquois, their staples, corn, beans, and squashes, being planted and tended, were collectively the gifts and constant care of the "Three Supporting Sisters"—"De-o-há-ko"—but any one of the secular oaks and sequoias, the growth of which is not observed, may have in the regions where they are found its individual numen. The red tuft of the woodpecker, the blindness of the mole, the forked tongue of the snake, and the spark from the flint, each had its storied cause in the adventures of ancestors and daimons.

It is not correct to call our Indian a Zoöloter, except in so far that his intense study of the habits of animals has individualized and personified their special characteristics, and that, taught by fasting visions, he generally adopts some bird or beast in mutual relation of protection and respect, though not often strictly with worship. He had no special cult of a living animal, such for instance as of the bull Apis, but deified its mystical progenitor or prototype. Michabo, the Great Hare, was to the Algonkins

their own ancestor, founder of their religious rites, and ruler of the weather, while the coyote was the parent and benefactor of the Karoks and other Californians. The rattlesnake was a general "grandfather," and, though greatly feared, was, it is said, never intentionally killed. Some authors have asserted that fetichism is not found in American religions, but that would only be true with a narrow definition of fetichism, which is but one form of animism, and should include all attribution of voluntary power to inanimate objects, not, as are idols, representative or symbolic, which is as prominent a feature in Indian as in African mythology. Even the most repulsive fetichistic details survive in what has, foolishly enough, been translated "medicine," embracing charms and amulets, the fossil tooth carried by the Assiniboin, the tail feathers of the chapparal cock sacred among the Cheyennes, stones with vivid spots, colored earth or sand, bones and ashes of animals, birds and reptiles, deposited in bags with ceremonial chants and dances, and possessing as used deadly or saving virtues. We find here, in short, with new faces, most of the antique foes of Christianity, *e. g.* Antientism, hero and astral worship—sometimes mingled, as when an Iroquois tribe revered Ioskeha, born of a virgin daughter of the moon, as its father and bestower of fire—metempsychosis of man and beast, apparitions and sorcery, oracle and disease-possession by good and bad spirits, and the eastern psychopomp has its analogue in the dog slain, or the bird loosed at the grave. Our Indians, so long secluded and delayed in their sociological culture, were on their discovery no better and no worse, religiously, than the population of what it is the fashion to call *Juventus mundi*. Referring then to Mr. Catlin's pathetic lament, if all the members of their polytheism, or rather polydaimonism, had been addressed on any day by each native inhabitant of the continent, the list of prayers would have far exceeded his sixteen millions, but the multiplication would have been produced by the census of the divinities as a factor quite as important as that of their worshippers.

This leads us to consider the common belief that the native population on the arrival of the first colonists was very large, has been and still is rapidly becoming extinct, and that the cause of that extinction is an inherent characteristic or defect of the race rendering impossible its civilization or even existence with civilized environments.

(*The part of the paper under this head will be published in the Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Nashville Meeting. 1877.*)

The conclusions reached are, that the pre-Columbian population of the territory occupied by the United States has been wildly overestimated; that, while many of its component bodies have

been diminished or been destroyed by oppression and violence, their loss has been in large part compensated by gain among others, that the "blight" and "withering," or *feræ naturæ* theory is proved to be absurdly false, and that, though some temporary retrogradation must always be expected among individual tribes, at the crises of their transition from savagery or barbarism to more civilized habits, yet now the number of our Indians is on the increase, and will naturally so continue unless repressed by causes not inherent to civilization, but to criminal misgovernment, until their final absorption into the wondrous amalgam of all earth's peoples which the destiny of this country may possibly effect. Neither from views of their physiological, religious, or sociological characteristics, should they be regarded as an exceptional or abnormal part of the human race, or so treated in our national policy. Only those legislators and officials, who are prepared to encourage downright murder, can neglect their duty under the Satanic consolation of the convenient extinction doctrine. With continued injustice more Sitting Bulls and chief Josephs, driven into the last refuge of despair, will require expenditure of blood and treasure which simple truth and honesty would prevent, while judicious and consistent treatment would preserve, reclaim, and elevate a race entrusted to our national honor, which may with no interminable delay become a valuable element in our motley community.

Mr. POWELL spoke of the greater permanency of the larger confederacies of the North American Indians; also of the knowledge of medicine attributed to them, and their having poisoned arrows, as fallacious. They used charms and charmed arrows. The popular idea of their languages being meagre, and requiring facial expression to convey their meaning, is incorrect.

Mr. WOODWARD remarked on the danger of generalizing from one country to another. The South American Indians have poisoned arrows.

Mr. MASON spoke of the arrows from blowpipes of the South American Indians, and of the "black drink" used by them, which is a purgative and an emetic: also of the immense ancient population in the Valley of the Mississippi, as evidenced by mounds, monuments, and remains. He further remarked that the truth as to the number of Indians in North America at the time of its discovery by Europeans was probably between the extreme estimates at first and the subsequent skeptical doubts; but there was very little ground to stand on, and admitting widely different speculations.